

# TRUTH AND POST-TRUTH IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: BETWEEN COMPETING FACTS, PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES AN ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION VALIDATION MECHANISMS WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA SPACE

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## Abstract

The present article analyses the transformation of the status of truth in the context of contemporary digital communication, starting from the premise that the post-truth phenomenon represents not only the proliferation of false information, but a structural mutation in the way public knowledge is validated. The study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating the philosophical analysis of the concept of truth with theories of communication and research of digital media. Based on a conceptual approach and recent case studies, the article shows that the digital environment favours the transition from the factual validation to the emotional validation of information, determined by the algorithmic logic of platforms, fragmentation of attention and identity polarization. In this context, truth loses its role as a stable epistemic criterion and becomes a strategic tool in the discursive competition between political, institutional and media actors. The conclusion of the research is that post-truth must be understood as an emerging epistemic ecosystem, in which the relationship between knowledge, power, and technology redefines the very social function of truth. Through this perspective, the study contributes to the development of a more nuanced understanding of the impact of digital communication on democracy and contemporary public discourse.

**Keywords:** *post-truth; social epistemology; digital communication; public trust; political polarization; social validation of information, Michel Foucault.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transformations of digital communication in the last two decades have generated a structural change in the way truth is produced, circulated and socially validated. In an information ecosystem dominated by algorithmic platforms, social networks and artificial intelligence technologies, the traditional distinction between

fact and opinion is becoming increasingly fragile. The notion of "post-truth" describes this mutation in which the appeal to emotions, identity and group belonging prevails over empirical verifiability.

Although the term has entered the public discourse relatively recently, the phenomenon it designates has deeper philosophical, political, and technological roots. In this context, the analysis of post-truth cannot be reduced to the study of disinformation or media manipulation, but it must be approached interdisciplinary, at the intersection of epistemology, communication theory and digital studies.

This article aims to investigate how the digital environment reconfigures the relationship between truth, lie and credibility, analysing both the conceptual foundations of the notion of truth and the concrete mechanisms through which post-truth manifests itself in contemporary communication. Methodologically, the research combines conceptual analysis with the study of recent cases of disinformation, in order to highlight how the technological structures and emotional dynamics of the online space contribute to the transformation of truth from an epistemic criterion into a strategic tool.

Through this approach, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of post-truth not only as a media phenomenon, but also as a symptom of a deeper mutation in the relationship between knowledge, power and society in the digital age.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The central question of the research is: How does the digital environment transform the status of truth from epistemic criteria into a social and emotional construct and what implications does this transformation have for public communication and the democratic functioning of society?

The hypothesis of the article is that post-truth represents not only the proliferation of false information, but a structural change in the conditions for validating truth, determined by the interaction between algorithmic technologies, collective emotional dynamics and the erosion of traditional epistemic authorities.

The main contribution of the study consists of:

(1) articulating an interdisciplinary perspective on post-truth, which integrates the philosophy of truth, communication theory and analysis of digital media;

(2) conceptualizing post-truth as an “epistemic ecosystem,” not just as a manipulation technique;

(3) highlighting the way in which contemporary digital infrastructures favours the emotional validation of information to the detriment of factual verifiability.

### 2.1. The genesis of the concept of post-truth

The concept of post-truth emerged against the background of profound social, political and technological transformations, which changed the way information is produced, distributed and publicly validated. The expansion of the internet and of social networks allowed the rapid circulation of information, including incomplete or distorted information, without going through traditional journalistic verification mechanisms. This direct circulation of content has created an informational space in which perceptions, emotions, and group identities can influence the acceptance of truth more than fact-checking.

The decline in trust when it comes to traditional institutions, such as governments, the media or experts, has amplified this process. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2025, only 38% of respondents still say they trust traditional media, while the majority say they give more credit to information coming from personal circles. Events such as the 2008 financial crisis, recent geopolitical

conflicts or the management of the pandemic contributed to the reinforcement of the perception that institutions no longer have a monopoly on public credibility.

Media fragmentation has accentuated this dynamic. The multiplication of information sources and the possibility of preferential selection of content favoured isolation in information bubbles (Pariser, 2012), in which individuals are exposed mainly to opinions compatible with their own beliefs. In this context, the factual truth does not disappear, but it loses its universal authority, being reinterpreted according to social and identity affiliations.

The intellectual genealogy of the concept is equally relevant. Michel Foucault’s analyses regarding the relationship between discourse, knowledge, and power suggested that truth is not only discovered, but also socially produced, within regimes of institutional validation. In another register, writer Steve Tesich introduced the term “post-truth” in early 1990s in order to describe society’s tendency to prefer convenient narratives to uncomfortable reality. The consecration of the term as the “2016 Word of the Year” reflected the global recognition of this transformation (Foucault, 1980).

### 2.2. Truth versus post-truth

#### a) Definitions

In ancient times, truth was personified by the goddess Aletheia. Daughter of Zeus or the clay creation of Prometheus, truth was not a simple dictionary definition, but a search for the foundation of reality. The concept evolved from a mythical-linguistic perspective to a logical and metaphysical one. This evolution included four great directions with the help of which the ancient people defined truth:

1. *Aletheia* (early Greece): Truth as “non-concealment.” Before becoming a technical term, the Greek *aletheia* ( / αληθεια) revealed the privative prefix “a-” and “lethe” (forgetting/hiding). Truth meant bringing something out of hiding, revealing reality as it is behind appearances. For the pre-Socratic philosophers (such as Parmenides), truth represented the unchanging reality, as opposed to the changing opinions of men (*doxa*).

2. Plato saw truth as participation in *ideas*. For him, the world we see with our eyes is only a shadow and the truth lies in the contemplation of Ideas (the eternal and perfect forms). For Plato (1998), truth is the sunlight that blinds those accustomed to umbrellas. Truth is not in the material object (which perishes), but in its eternal concept (Platon, 1998).
3. The classical definition of truth belonged to Aristotle who “descended” truth from the heaven of Plato’s ideas and placed it in language and logic. Truth is not in the material world, but in the contemplation of eternal, perfect Forms. He gave the most influential definition in history: “To say of something that is that it is not, or of something that is not that it is, is false; and to speak of something that is that it is, and of something that is not that it is not, is true.” (Aristotle, 1965). He saw truth as a property of our judgment, which arises when our thinking “fits” with the external reality. This perspective became the basis for what we nowadays call the correspondence theory.
4. The Hellenistic schools (Stoics and Epicureans) came with their own visions. The Stoics believed that truth is related to the “comprehensible representation” (*kataleptike phantasia*). An impression is true if it is so clear that the mind cannot deny it. For epicureans, the sensations are always true. The error does not occur in the senses, but in the way our mind interprets sensory data.

Hegel saw truth as a whole, a historical, dialectical and systemic process. Truth is not a mere correspondence between a statement and an external object, but a living and dynamic process, it is the result not only of the statement. (Hegel, 1965)

Like his predecessors, Hegel’s ideas did not escape the caudal forks of analysis. His most vehement opponent was Kierkegaard (2017), for whom truth was subjectivity itself, the passionate way in which the individual relates to an objective uncertainty.

For materialists, truth is not a spiritual construct or a subjective experience, but a faithful reflection of the objective reality in human consciousness. If for Hegel truth was the “system” of ideas, and for

Kierkegaard it was the “living” of the individual, materialists anchor everything in matter. Truth exists independently of our will or desires (Engels, 1967). A statement is true if and only if it corresponds to the state of affairs in the world. In the tradition of the correspondence theory, truth is defined by the adequacy between sentence and reality. In the digital context, this paradigm seems to be competed with various forms of validation based on community coherence and emotional resonance (Aquinas, 2009).

If the materialists of the nineteenth century saw consciousness as a “mirror” that passively reflects matter, modern physics changes everything: the disappearance of the detached observer. In quantum experiments, such as the “double slit” experiment, it has been shown that the mere presence of an observer (or a measuring device) determines how the particle behaves (where vs. the corpuscle). Certain views of quantum mechanics suggest that there is no pure objective reality that can be observed without being altered by the act of observation (Bohr, 1934).

Then it was the turn of postmodernism. Foucault brought the perspective of the social construction of truth. There is no such thing as “truth” but only “discourses regarding the truth,” imposed by power or cultural consensus.

#### **b) Key transformations in the perception of truth**

In the era of “post-truth” or Artificial Intelligence, the definition shifts again and truth tends to become an emotional consensus validated by group membership or algorithmic effectiveness. (McIntyre, 2018).

- ◇ **Supremacy of emotions and beliefs** – In the post-truth era, what the public feels can weigh more than what is demonstrable. Messages that trigger strong emotions, such as fear or indignation, spread faster and are more memorable than neutral information.
- ◇ **Erosion of traditional authority** – Journalism, science and governments, once seen as sources of authority and expertise, are losing credibility in the eyes of the information consumer who prefers alternative sources or online communities. This phenomenon is amplified by the unlimited access to information and the

possibility of verifying or interpreting data according to one's own criteria.

- ◇ **Fragmentation and personalization of information flow** – Recommendation algorithms on social media create 'information bubbles' that reinforce existing opinions and reduce exposure to conflicting perspectives. Thus, the truth becomes relative depending on the community or the information environment in which the individual is located.
- ◇ **Relativization of facts in public discourse** – In political and media discourse, the terms "truth" and "lie" become flexible. Post-truth allows for the selective reinterpretation or reinterpretation of events in order to serve certain agendas, which affects society's ability to build consensus based on facts.

### **The Consequences of Post-Truth on Critical Thinking**

The transformations induced by post-truth affect not only journalism or politics, but also education and civic culture. The audience is challenged to develop **skills for the critical evaluation of sources**, informational discernment and resistance to emotional manipulation. In the absence of these, society risks accepting subjective narratives as generally valid truths.

### **2.3. Post-truth and the impact on digital communication**

The concept of post-truth did not emerge as a laboratory "invention" of a single individual, but it represents the result of a convergence between academic philosophy, digital technology and political strategies of manipulation. Its roots can be identified on three levels:

1. The terminological root can be identified in the Serbian-American writer Steve Tesich who first used the term "post-truth" in an essay in *The Nation magazine*. He lamented, referring to the Iran-Contra scandal and the Gulf War, that "*we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in a post-truth world, where facts no longer matter whether they contradict psychological comfort or national pride.*" The idea was taken up and developed by Ralph Keyes in 2004 in a book entitled *The Post-Truth Era*, in which he argued that lying had become so common that we began to call

it "euphemistically" (e.g., "post-truth"), so that we would no longer feel moral guilt. In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries declared "post-truth" the word of the year.

2. The philosophical root (Who "prepared" the ground?) Some historians of ideas argue that post-truth could be considered the "unwanted child" of postmodernism. Even if they do not have identical formulations, other philosophers (such as Michel Foucault) are quoted here and they argue that there is no "Absolute Truth," but only "discourses of power." Although their intention was critical (to dismantle dictatorships and authority), their idea that "*everything is interpretation*" was later taken up and perverted by politicians. They began to say, "If there is no objective truth, then my version is as valid as the one belonging to experts/scientists."
3. At the same time, a strategic root can also be identified. The question arises whether the phrase was created to order. If we look at it from the perspective of social engineering, the answer could be positive. There are clear moments when "post-truth" has been used as a tool of political struggle. There could be many examples. In the 1950s and 60s, in the face of pressure, the tobacco industry created a model of "doubt manufacturing." Since they couldn't prove that smoking is healthy, they paid scientists to say, "We're not sure, more studies are required." The strategy was the following: Doubt is our product. More recently, modern political strategy operates with the concept of "alternative truths". Contemporary political strategies suggest that the delegitimization of truth does not operate by directly suppressing factual information, but by multiplying competing discourses, which lead to the relativization of validation criteria (Heisenberg, 1958).

Conclusion: Who does it serve? It serves any power structure that wants to avoid responsibility. If the facts are "interpretable," then no one can be held responsible. If Aristotle said that truth represents the correspondence with reality, post-truth represents the denial of the usefulness of this correspondence. It is a "refined lie" because it does not want to make you believe a lie, but it

wants to make you stop believing in anything. Developments confirm Foucault's arguments that truth is produced by the social mechanisms of power and not purely objective. (Foucault, 1980). This perspective helps to critically understand who it belongs to and what benefits from the definition of "truth" in a given era. Let us not forget that the works of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard on the subjectivity of truth and the dissolution of fixed meaning also contributed to the preparation of the ground for post-truth relativism.

#### 2.4. Lie vs. Post Truth

And if post-truth is in fact an instrument through which power imposes its truth and not a neutral reality, what prevents us from considering post-truth as a refined scholarly lie? Reality "*is always in danger of being punctured by isolated lies or torn apart by the organized lies of groups, nations or classes.*" (Arendt, 1971)

Upon careful analysis we notice that post-truth and falsehood exist on a continuum, but in different areas:

Firstly, **lying is an act, it wants to change what you think.** Post-truth can be described as a structural condition of digital communication; it wants to change the way you think. While lying could be seen as a specific virus that you can isolate and combat with an antidote (truth), post-truth is like a polluted environment, a "climate" in which the virus of lies can no longer be easily neutralized, because the immune system of the society (critical thinking, trust in facts) is weakened.

Secondly, **the lie fights the truth and the post-truth makes the truth irrelevant.** In post-truth, it doesn't matter if a statement is verifiable or not. It matters if *it resonates* with the beliefs of a group, if it makes people feel good, if it mobilizes them against an "enemy." Truth becomes an optional tool, not a foundation.

Thirdly, **lying is easier to attribute.** A liar can be proven much easier. Post-truth represents a collective, diffuse phenomenon. There is not necessarily any central "liar," but a lot of people who, in an environment that has abandoned epistemological standards, construct their own comfortable realities. **Lying can fail. Post-truth**

**can succeed even when the specific "lie" is dismantled.**

If you expose a lie ("Deck A is unsafe, here's the technical evidence"), the lie collapses and the action is corrected (people no longer walk on the deck). In post-truth, even if you expose the "lie" ("I've proven engineers right"), the **main goal has already been achieved:** to strengthen the cohesion of the tribe against the "elites," and to emotionally empower its members. The fact that the bridge was actually dangerous becomes a detail. The main battle was won on the terrain of identity.

#### 2.5. Mechanisms of post-truth in the digital environment

From an academic perspective, post-truth can be understood as a cognitive and social environment in which the validation of information is mediated by emotions, identities and belongings. Among the psychological mechanisms involved we mention: the confirmation bias, the tendency to retain repeated information (familiarity effect), and the predisposition to give credibility to socially close sources.

Digital platforms and influencers amplify these processes, transforming individual perceptions into collective representations of reality. Thus, post-truth is not reduced to disinformation, but describes a mutation in the way society decides what is credible and what it is not.

The difference from lying remains essential. Lying presupposes an individual act and direct responsibility, while post-truth operates systemically. It does not require a single author or explicit intention, but results from the interaction between technology, collective psychology and social communication. This perspective explains why the fight against post-truth cannot be reduced to fact-checking, but involves rebuilding the mechanisms of public trust.

*a) Fragmentation of attention and the superficial transformation of information*

The Internet no longer invites deep reading, contemplation, or reflection—but skimming, continuous scrolling, quick reactions (Carr,

2011). This change affects peoples' ability to process complex information, to make connections or to think critically and deeply. This fragmentation of attention favours an instant emotional response, not a rational evaluation, and provides an ideal state for post-truth.

*b) Recommended living standards*

The practices of tech giants are to collect user data and use it in a way that was unimaginable not far from a few years ago. (Zuboff, 2019). Unlike the classic, "simple" form of capitalism – where supply means the production of goods and services that directly satisfy demand – in surveillance capitalism, things are quite different. Supply not only produces goods and services, but learns consumer behaviours and then directs them at will. And it's all done with the help of data.

*c) Information "bubbles" and amplification algorithms*

Content that generates emotions – outrage, fear, anger, shock – is privileged by algorithms. That's how they're designed. As a result, polarizing, sensitive, dramatic information circulates much faster and has more visibility. This mechanism undermines critical discernment: what matters is not the truth, but the emotional impact. Studies regarding the "low-credibility content" show that it circulates quickly with the help of automated accounts (bots), amplifying misinformation.

*d) "Emotional efficiency" and the superficiality of interaction*

The American sociologist Sherry Turkle observes that although "the internet promises to make our world bigger, as it works now, it even restricts our exposure to ideas." Goodreads And she also warns that, in the rush for quick connection, we lose the capacity for solitude, inner reflection and real empathy. Instead of conversing, we are content to "connect" – but a superficial connection does not replicate the depth of a face-to-face interaction. Goodreads+1.

In this logic, authentic empathy, attention to complexity, reflection and discernment become incompatible with the pace imposed by the digital environment.

*e) Destroying the boundaries between reality and simulacrum*

Emerging technologies – from automated text generators to deepfake video – are making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and artificial. Under such conditions, the truth becomes not only difficult to find, but also relative. Post-truth is no longer just a distortion – it becomes a competition between versions, perceptions and emotions. (Bârgăoanu, 2018)

*f) Impact on journalism and civil society*

Journalism faces the challenge of regaining public trust, and education needs to develop digital and critical skills to effectively navigate the post-truth world. These skills include an adaptation of the ability to evaluate multiple sources and detect misinformation, to understand the algorithmic mechanisms that influence what information we see and, last but not least, the development of emotional discernment so as not to let instinctive reactions dictate beliefs. The pressure of speed reduces the depth of journalistic investigation, fact-checking, and data analysis. Quality journalism is in danger. The audience no longer comes only with neutral questions, but with emotions, prejudices and expectations. The position of the "journalist-defender of the truth" becomes important – but difficult. Under these conditions, information democracy is threatened: public decisions, opinions, debates are polarized, controlled by what "catches" the public, not by what is real.

*g) Consequences on the human being: cognitively and empathy under pressure*

In the digital sphere, the ability to concentrate and reflect decreases; deep thinking atrophies. At the same time, genuine empathy becomes rare: superficial relationships, emotional conformity and isolation increase. Personal identity also suffers, it risks becoming an "online version," dependent on external validation and algorithms, not on introspection and awareness.

## **2.6. Strategies to counteract post-truth**

Some of the most necessary measures that could lead to the restoration of balance are media literacy and digital literacy and the habit of knowing how to distinguish true information

from noise. For this, an important role belongs to journalism, which must assume the responsibility of rigorously, transparently and with respect for complexity analyse all information that comes to its attention. But responsibility must be assumed at the highest levels of society in order to adopt ethical and legislative regulations for digital platforms: algorithmic transparency, accountability for content, protection against disinformation. And all this while taking care of cultivating various spaces for reflection, solitude or deep reading in order to maintain the capacity for empathy and discernment. Combating post-truth involves a multidimensional approach, targeting individuals, media outlets and digital platforms.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

Post-truth represents not a simple proliferation of falsehood, but a transformation of the way truth is socially recognized. The Internet, media fragmentation and political polarization have created a space in which the validation of information increasingly depends on its compatibility with collective identities and public emotions.

In this context, the factual truth does not disappear, but loses its interpretative monopoly, being competed with various alternative explanations that are emotionally and socially supported. Understanding post-truth therefore involves not only combating disinformation, but also rebuilding the culture of public trust, developing media literacy and strengthening critical thinking. This is the only way in which

the balance between perception and reality, essential for the democratic functioning of contemporary society, can be restored.

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